

## [Yes, Thank You]

19857

YES, THANK YOU-

When we reached the end of the hall Judy Griffith said to me, "This is the rest room - kind of cozy with the wicker furniture, isn't it? Pal and I are working the same trick this week, 7-11, 12-4. It's not bad. Better than nights. Though you got more working nights. We're having a fifteen minute relief now; if that isn't enough time for you, you can come back this afternoon. There's a relief every four hours." She thrust out a hand to wake the other operator who lay flat on her back on the wicker lounge. I protested, and Judy smiled reassuringly. "It's O.K. Once Pal's eyes are open she won't mind, I know her. Besides it's worse sleeping for only fifteen minutes, you wake up groggy and achy. Pal, wake up. Here's someone wants to hear us say more than 'Number, please' and 'Yes, thank you.'"

The girl Pal was pretty. Her oval face shone with a healthy pallor accented by a long black bob and thick, sooty lashes. She propped herself on an elbow and blinked at Judy. "Well, Nuisance, what do you want?"

Obviously they were good friends, accustomed to chaffing, unresentful. Judy guessed, "You must have had a date last night." She turned to me. "This is Palmira Fernandez. When you don't see her lapping up a chocolate milk at the drug store across the street on her relief, you know darn' well she must have had a date last night."

"Date!" Pal's voice was ironic. Judy asked in quick sympathy. "What's the matter, that family of yours stay up 2 again to keep you company?"

Pal nodded. "Bill couldn't get the car last night, his father was going to some meeting. We had to go to the movies and then home. You can't just park in some booth half the night

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without ordering anything. Bill gets paid on Saturday," she explained for my benefit. "We were both broke so we went home. Johnny -my brother- had his gang on the porch; my mother was holding down the living room until Dad got back; my sister and Lucy Cano were trying out dance steps in the kitchen. I went to bed as soon as I got home. Bill's sick of supervision. I don't blame him. It's different when he has the car. Even if there's no gas we can sit and talk and listen to the radio. Anyway it's privacy."

"You're better off than Evelyn Drandelli," Judy commented. "I was coming downstreet last night around eight. I saw her meet Joe on the corner. Has to every time. He's never been to her house. They're sore 'cause he's not Italian."

"My folks like Bill well enough," Pal said. "It's just that they believe in that eternal chaperoning. They were brought up that way in Spain. You'd think the two of us got so much nature we couldn't be left alone a minute without starting a family. When they don't care for someone they let you know. Last year while I was going with Pete my father swore the kitchen blue. Told me not to get serious over a stonecutter, though he's one himself and always has been. He meant well. I mean my father. He's had a brother and an uncle died from doing that kind of work."

"There's a whole clan of us Fernandez in town. All from 3 Santander, Spain. I've never been there. My folks came over twenty-nine years ago. A baby brother of mine -their first baby- crossed half way with them. Some epidemic broke out on board. They never knew what it was except that it was a fever. My brother died when they were five days out. My mother was so sick that they told her a cousin in another cabin was caring for the baby. She believed it. When they reached New York she asked for the baby, and, of course she had to be told. She nearly went crazy. She made my father go to the kitchen and ask the cook for a bottle, and she made him fill it with ocean water. It was all she could ever see of the baby's grave, she said. It's still in her dresser drawer at home, pushed back with medicine bottles and hair nets. She takes it out on All Souls' day and Memorial Day, and sets a bouquet in front of it."

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"We've always lived on Berton Street. Not an ideal residential section, but it's near the shed where my father works. At first they rented it, now they own it. About a dozen sheds are clustered there. When they're going full blast they make an awful racket.

"Hosina was the nest baby. She's entered the convent in Burlington. Next year she takes the black veil. My folks carried on something terrible when she decided to enter. Now they're as proud as peacocks. You'd think she was the only one they'd given birth to. We see her one Sunday a month. A friend of Rosina's -a nun- was given an awfully funny name. I can't even remember it. Mother hoped and prayed that Rosina'd get one she could twist her tongue around. She's called 4 Sister Mary Thaddeus. Mother's already got in the habit of calling her Sister Tadeo. That's the Spanish for Thaddeus.

"Sylvia and John are still in high school. Sylvia's mind is set on being a nurse. John talks medicine all the time. Well, I wanted to teach,- and look where I am. I started to work right after graduation and planned to work only for the summer. It seemed so good earning my own money that I decided to stay the year. Then I stuck. It's not a bad job. It was awfully complicated at first, hard to get used to the switch board. You got darn' sick of saying 'Number, please,' and 'Yes, thank you' all the time. At first it was just 'Thank you.' Now it's 'Yes, thank you.' Next thing you know it'll be 'Yes, thank you. I'll try,' or some such nonsense. You get so used to those words they're apt to roll out of your mouth anytime. I was shopping in the dime store the other day, and when the clerk handed me the change I said, 'Yes, thank you.'

"You'd like our chief operator. She doesn't play any favorites. There's only about 18 in our office. Montpelier has over twice that. We don't take long distance calls. Those go through the Montpelier office."

"We get some funny calls," Judy remarked. "Remember last winter when a play was being broadcast, a play about Mars attacking the earth? Well, a local man called and wanted to know if it were really true. I told him I knew nothing about it. I didn't. I hadn't heard the

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radio. I didn't know whether to be scared or to set him down as a lunatic. The man was frantic. Wanted me to call New York 5 and get the truth. I told him I couldn't.

"Being on nights alone gets boring. Whoever's on usually locks the door and has the office to herself. Sometimes that Norwich crowd will call -if they haven't anything more exciting to do- and try to date up the operator. Whether they know you or not. They've got an awful bump on themselves, think they only have to whistle and you'll come running. Well, they've another guess coming as far as we operators are concerned. Most of the time we hang up on them, but if it's a slow night we let them gab just to keep us awake.

"Sometimes we're asked to be alarm clocks to heavy sleepers. Someone'll call the night operator and ask her to ring his number at a certain time in the morning. We aren't supposed to do that, but you hate to refuse a little favor -

"Occasionally we get a person who thinks we're some sort of information bureau. A couple of weeks ago a salesman called from the hotel. He wanted to know what movies were showing, and which was the best. And just yesterday a woman wanted to know the name of a cheap but good beauty parlor in town."

Pal said, "My mother'll never get used to a phone. There's only one number she'll call and that's my aunt's. If she needs groceries she'll go downtown herself and get them, or she'll wait until one of us is home to phone the order. She has a dread of being misunderstood over the phone. She isn't the only one. You'll find plenty of local foreign speaking old people who hate to use a phone."

Judy glanced at her watch. "Our relief's up," she said to Pal. And to me, "We have to go now -"